

Passing Love Notes by Luddleston

Series: [One Plus One](#) [2]

Category: Voltron: Legendary Defender

Genre: Alternate Universe, Fluff, Getting Together, M/M, Mutual Pining, mentions of past relationships - Freeform

Language: English

Characters: Allura (Voltron), Hunk (Voltron), Keith (Voltron), Lance (Voltron), Shay (Voltron)

Relationships: Keith/Lance (Voltron)

Status: Completed

Published: 2018-01-19

Updated: 2018-01-19

Packaged: 2022-12-19 11:25:44

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 1

Words: 13,987

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Lance has always thought it would be weird and uncomfortable to date one of his students' parents.

That was before he met Keith, a single dad with a kindergartener in Lance's art class, and just. *Very* pretty eyes.

(Lance's POV of [One Plus One](#))

Passing Love Notes

Author's Note:

I had a couple requests for a Lance version of my dad AU fic and I just kind of. Did the thing. Thanks to everyone who read and enjoyed the first fic, I honestly never thought so many people would like this AU that I made up for the cute <3

My original document for this is called "Lance is Thirsty" so I hope this gives you a good idea of what you're in for.

June

Going to bars with married people was the *worst*.

Lance loved Hunk and Shay. They were his best friends, and they had been since college, but they just didn't understand. They couldn't, because unlike him, they were not very single and very bi and very distracted by every hot person in this bar. Especially that guy in the leather jacket.

God, it was way too warm for a leather jacket and he should've looked ridiculous with it on, but somehow it was still cool. It matched his boots, which were scuffed like he did actual work in them. He had a jawline that must've been stolen from some old sculpture and, from what Lance could see squinting across the room, pretty eyes.

"I mean, he even pulls off the *ponytail*," Lance complained. He was sitting sideways on his half of the booth, one knee crooked, his heel against the edge of the bench. It gave him a better vantage point to check out that guy at the bar. "Do you think that dude with him is his boyfriend?" he asked, because the blond guy with him kept buying him drinks. Or, maybe just ordering him drinks? Lance wished he could hear them over the music, but it was good that he couldn't. That was too creepy, even for him.

"I dunno, you could like, go ask him," Hunk suggested. He had his arm around Shay, who was watching Lance's latest crush too, trying to help him

determine whether Hot and Dangerous was single. "I mean, that's normal, right? Hitting on someone in a bar?"

"I don't remember how to hit on someone in real life," Lance said, punctuating it with a sip of his drink, which was still just as delicious as it had been the last time he tried it. This place had dangerous cocktails; the number of glasses Lance had gone through in one night was proof of that.

"I think it involves words," Hunk said.

"You don't know, either," Shay observed.

Since Lance broke up with his last girlfriend, which had been a catastrophe for the ages, he hadn't seriously dated anyone. He'd talked to some people online, but either the conversation fizzled out or they just hooked up and didn't see each other again. And it wasn't like he was busting out pickup lines for every cute person he saw on his morning jog.

"Guys. I don't think I'm cool anymore."

"You were cool?" Hunk asked, and Shay either couldn't help giggling or didn't mind wounding Lance's pride even further.

"Shut up, I was super cool," he argued. Something had declined since graduation, and he couldn't track it, but he'd say it correlated with getting older. Hanging out with a bunch of little kids all day didn't really help up his cool factor, either.

Blond Guy left Hot Guy to head for the pool table, where someone who looked like a smaller, shorter-haired version of Blond Guy was playing against some guys who looked like college students. They also looked like they were drunk, and like Tiny was kicking their asses. Hot Guy flagged the bartender down for another drink. This was the ideal time for Lance to walk over and say something. Do something. Be sexy.

Did he know how to be sexy anymore?

"Talk. To him," Hunk said, and Lance knew that if he didn't have his legs up on the bench, Hunk would've been kicking him under the table. "You miss all the chances you don't take, or whatever. Someone said that, right?"

"I think it's, 'you miss one hundred percent of the shots you don't take'," Shay said. "Either way, you should talk to him."

Oh, god. Now Shay, who had never pressured anyone to do anything in her whole life, was egging him on. Lance finished the rest of his drink.

"Okay," he said, "okay. I'm going over there, but it's *just* to get another drink, alright? If I *happen* to talk to him, it's not why I went over there. I want that on the record."

"Sure, let me tell my stenographer. *Go*," Hunk ordered, pulling Lance's glass away from him so he couldn't distract himself by fishing ice cubes out with cocktail straws.

He stood. He had to take a breath to steady himself after, but he did.

He fucked it up. Big time.

He didn't even make an *effort* to look like he was casually getting a drink, he just dropped into the barstool next to the guy (even though most of them were free) and released the worst barrage of pickup lines anyone had ever said in a row. Oh, god. Lance was terrible at flirting now. When did that happen?

Halfway through, the dude started talking about his kid, which was like, the ultimate "I might be married, go away" signal, except he seemed intent on implying that he was not straight and he was single, he just didn't like Lance. That was even worse.

Lance should've just gone back to their table with his drink (he did remember to order one, eventually) in his hand and his metaphorical tail between his legs, but drunk Lance got very excited about the fact that Hot Guy had a five-year-old, because kids were adorable and he needed to see pictures. It was like how if he drank enough wine during movie night, he'd

start looking at pictures of baby animals on his phone and, if he had *enough* wine, start crying a little bit.

Hot Guy, which was what Lance was forced to label him as because he hadn't even gotten his *name*, showed him a picture of him with a little boy who had a mess of curly hair and the same smile as his dad. They were in front of a Christmas tree, and it looked like a selfie. It was adorable, and Lance made sure to let him know.

Then, of course, Lance had to explain why him being more excited about pictures of this dude's kid than whatever else they'd been talking about was normal. It was partially because he was an uncle and an elementary-school teacher, and spent most of his time with small children. It was partially because the other conversation had not been going well.

Trying to not seem weird didn't work, either, because Hot Guy made some sort of hand signal at the blond one, and then it was all, "oh, right, you have to go," because it sounded less like rejection if Lance said it. Then, he said, "see you around," which was, well, lame, and also *why did he say that? He wasn't gonna see him around!*

Maybe, maybe Lance could've gotten out of there with some of his dignity intact, but Drunk Lance decided to pat Hot Guy on the shoulder, like he was one of his students, or something, before finally getting the hell out of there.

Once he heard the bell over the door chime, he dropped his face onto the table, which was sticky. Bad idea, Lance. "I'm never going to find love," he groaned, sitting back up and rubbing his forehead, where he was sure there was some kind of residue.

"Aww, buddy, don't say that," Hunk said.

"He's even hotter up close," Lance complained, cranking up the dramatics, "He didn't even tell me his name. I asked him what his name was, and he just. Didn't tell me. It was a series of increasingly painful rejections and I don't think I'll ever recover. Also, he has really pretty eyes."

"He sounds kind of rude," Shay said, because Shay was probably polite to people who tried to strike up weird conversations in a bar. Or, she would be, if people tried that, but people usually didn't, once they realized her husband had biceps the size of their face.

"I don't care. He's so beautiful. And I fucked it up," Lance sighed, drowning his sorrows in another fruity drink.

And then, eventually, after enough fruity drinks, Hunk decided that if Lance didn't want to go home, he'd just carry him, so Lance went, but he definitely couldn't walk a straight line. Ah, whatever. He thought, he'd regret it tomorrow, but hey, maybe then he'd have something to regret even more than whatever he said to that guy.

When he woke up the next morning, he regretted all of it equally.

August

All summer, Lance had been working on another mural for the school. He'd done one every summer since he started working there, and if he kept it up, there wouldn't be a blank space on the wall left. The one he was finishing was, like the other two, a huge, roaring lion, because it was the school's mascot, and Lance liked cats.

"Do you think if I gave this one a tail that shoots laserbeams, they'd be mad at me?" he asked Hunk, who was hanging out in a chair he'd pulled into the hallway so he could go over his lesson plans while Lance was painting. They functioned better when both of them were doing whatever they needed to in the same space, both because they'd keep each other from getting distracted and because they occasionally needed a soundboard to bounce laserbeam-related questions off of.

"Yeah, probably," Hunk said, and Lance pouted and continued painting in the boring-ass regular tail. He did make it extra fluffy, though.

After a long span of silence, broken only once when Hunk dropped one of his books on the ground and nearly made Lance streak white paint across the lion's entire paw, he said, "so, you remember Becca?"

"Yes," Hunk said, and he stretched it out like he was worried about what was going to come next. Lance wasn't surprised by that, Hunk had built up a longstanding grudge against her. And against all the whiny pop music Lance had listened to after they broke up.

"She texted me the other day. Well. She sent me a message on Facebook. Did you know I still had one of those? Apparently, I do. So she messaged me. And stuff." He painted as he spoke, so he could focus on his work and not on Hunk, who was probably giving him a judgmental look, which he completely deserved.

"What's 'and stuff'," he asked, and Lance could hear the air-quotes.

"I didn't say anything back," Lance said, "she just said like, 'hey, it's been a while, how are you doing?' or something like that."

Hunk scoffed, and when Lance looked at him over his shoulder, he was rolling his eyes. "That's what she says? After, what, four years? She breaks your heart, and then four years later, it's just like, hey?"

Lance stood and stretched until his back popped. "She's not a bad person, Hunk, she just did a lot of bad stuff." He stepped back to the opposite side of the hallway and looked over the painting from a distance. He was close to done, just had to go over the outlines again, and make the mane a little more even.

"Nope. You cheat, you're a bad person, end of story," Hunk said.

"So, I guess you'd tell me not to say anything back?" Lance asked, picking through his jar of paintbrushes for the nice one he wanted to use for the outlines.

"Uh, yeah, that's exactly what I'd tell you."

"You know what? I kind of didn't want to," he said, going back to work, cupping his elbow with his opposite hand to keep his arm steady while he worked on the little details. "I guess that's moving on?"

"Good for you," Hunk said, without sarcasm. He could've easily been sarcastic about it; it'd been a whole three years.

"You know who I would talk to, though? Somebody like... somebody like that guy I tried to talk to at the bar. Oh my god. I would absolutely want to talk to him." He hadn't seen Hot Guy again, even though he and Hunk and Shay frequented the place. They were almost regulars. At least regular enough that the bartender sympathized with him for striking out when they were back in the next weekend. Lance, to negative response, had told Hunk and Shay they had to stop coming there, because someone saw that and remembered it.

"Alright," Hunk said, in that tone that meant, sure, Lance, whatever works for you.

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Hunk was starting to get very annoyed with Lance. He could tell this, because Hunk was giving him the kind of stern look he gave his kindergarteners when they were being bad. He was doing this because Lance had been kicking him under the table, trying to get his attention and point him in the direction of one of the dads at the parent orientation, but Hunk was busy doing his job and shit.

Lance was trying to get Hunk's attention for good reason: he felt like he was going to scream, because that dude in the crowd was *absolutely one hundred percent* the Hot Guy from the bar, and Hunk had to stop him. Lance's screaming was unpleasant.

But seriously, what the actual hell was he doing here.

Oh god. Lance knew he had a kid, who must've been about kindergartener-age, and shit, of *course* he was going to this school, they lived in a tiny town and had two elementary schools, there was literally a fifty-fifty chance.

Hot Guy had ditched the leather jacket for the evening, and he was wearing a dark red sweater that looked like it was one of those really soft ones. He

had his hair pulled into a ponytail again, and this time, he was in glasses. Black ones, with thick rims, and he occasionally had to push his hair out from behind the frames. Lance was going to have to either learn his name or change his mental description of him to Adorable Guy.

Since the universe was giving him a second chance, one where he was not drunk and was capable of acting like a normal adult talking to another normal adult, Lance decided he had to take it. He managed to keep his eyes to himself for the whole "this is what you do on your kid's first day of school" speech, *and* for the part where the parents asked questions, so afterward, he felt like it was perfectly casual for him to head over and start up a conversation in a normal, non-creepy way.

"Hey, have we met before?" he said, because it was the only thing he could think of that wouldn't make him sound super desperate. His other options were, "I regret everything I said in that bar, even if I meant it all," or something along those lines.

Lance was disappointed to hear that he didn't remember the thing at the bar. He hadn't thought the dude was that drunk, but, shit, maybe he just didn't care. Or he just forgot. That must have been it, people probably hit on him all the time, and he didn't remember all of them. Couldn't, because there were so many.

Lost in wondering how many people exactly gave this guy their number on a daily basis, Lance went for the automatic handshake before realizing that he had his hands full. Oops. Sorry, Universe, but Lance was ruining his second chance, too.

He got a name, though: Keith. That alone made him smile, and after a polite, "nice to meet you," he was going to start asking whose class Keith's son was in, but someone tapped him on the shoulder and said, "excuse me, are you the art teacher?"

Lance was pulled into a conversation about art supplies and latex allergies (no, we don't use balloons for anything), and when he looked back over his shoulder, Keith was talking to Hunk. Lance, frustratingly enough, couldn't

get away from the other parents fast enough to say anything else to Keith—not that he had any idea what he'd say in the first place.

"That was him," he said to Hunk, with enough gravity that Hunk's eyebrows met his hairline.

"The hot guy?" Hunk asked. Well. Guess that stuck.

"His name's Keith," Lance sighed, and Hunk looked at him like if they were not surrounded with elementary-school parents, he would have smacked him. And Lance would've deserved it.

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Lance couldn't get completely into the swing of things for the year until the third day of classes, because art, music, and gym classes worked on a rotating schedule, and it took three days for him to meet every student he had for the year. Luckily, the school was small enough that he didn't have to remember too many names, and the students from previous years were easy, but the third day of classes was always when he got his final class of kindergarteners, and the last of his thirty to forty new names to remember.

So, for the first two weeks of classes, Lance told them that if they all kept name-tags on their desks, he'd bring them candy. Five-to-six-year-olds were exceptionally motivated when candy was involved, especially the ones with parents who were health nuts, so they all got very excited about decorating their nametags after Lance printed their names on them. Only some of them actually knew how to spell their names right, and all of them had even worse handwriting than Lance, so if he let them do it themselves, he knew he wouldn't be able to read it across the classroom. Instead, he printed all the nametags in black Sharpie the day before classes started, and called their names to pass them out, so they could draw whatever they wanted to on them.

He tried not to let his heart skip when he handed out a nametag labeled "Oliver Kogane" to probably the most adorable kid in the world (aside from the ones Lance was related to, because he was obliged to think that his nieces and nephews were cuter than anybody else's kids). Oliver had the

wildest, curliest head of hair Lance had seen on anybody, and his eyes were perfect ovals, drawn up in the corners, just like his dad's. He blinked up at Lance, like he hadn't noticed him calling his name until he got right next to him.

"Thank you," Oliver said, politely, and then, with no reason or prompting, "do you like cats?"

"Yeah!" Lance cheered, used to non-sequiturs from his class. "Are you drawing a cat on there?"

"I should," he said, gravely, like this was a suggestion that required some serious contemplation. Lance got it. If you had to have something on your desk for two weeks, it had to look good. "My cat is named Red," he said, picking out the appropriate marker. "She's not allowed inside because she hates my dad."

"That's too bad," Lance said, wondering what Keith did to make a cat hate him so much, before he was dragged away by someone whose name he didn't know yet, hailing him with *hey, uh, Mister, ummm*. Good to know Lance wasn't the only one who was still working on getting the names right.

As always, the kindergarteners were both the most adorable and the loudest of his students. Lance liked teaching most grades, but he liked the youngest ones the best. It was probably because, like him, they often forgot what they were talking about mid-sentence. They also reminded him of his sister's twins, who would be starting preschool this year, and who thought Lance was a human jungle gym and always stuck their faces way too close to the camera when he called them on Skype every week or so.

He was charmed most of all when one of his students finished an art project and ran across the classroom to hold it up and show it to him. It reminded him how much he wanted to have his own kids someday, and it made up for all the times one of them was screaming about something.

Today, it was a little girl named Destiny, who pulled on his jeans until he sat next to her and looked at her drawing, which was a palm tree on a tiny island, surrounded by green waves (she didn't have the blue marker, she

said). "I love the beach," he told her, while she contemplated putting a shark fin among all the waves, both of them enthused to the degree that only a kid or someone who thought like one could be.

"We went there. I saw a dolphin!" She nearly jumped out of her seat then, pigtail braids swinging, and Lance understood, because dolphins were worth that reaction.

Oliver leaned into his side, reaching over him to show Destiny his cat, which he'd illustrated with abnormally large ears. "I put a collar on her, but she doesn't really have one," he explained, "I keep telling my dad we should put one on her, or maybe a little bow."

"Do a bow," Destiny said, coloring her shark fin, "that's cuter."

Lance thought he had a pretty good class this year.

When class was over Lance had all of them line up at the door so he could count heads (thirteen... fourteen... okay, he had them all). Art class was the kindergarteners' last of the day, and so Lance's end-of-class duty was to escort them back to the classroom to get their backpacks, and then head to the front door of the school with them to help them find their parents, because Hunk and the two other kindergarten teachers logistically couldn't handle that many kids at once.

He wasn't sure how much help one more person was, but anything was better than nothing in that chaos.

Since it was still the first week of school, a lot of the parents came up to the door to pick up their kids, instead of lining up a parade of minivans and family-friendly SUVs and Honda Civics (not that Lance could really judge anybody's car, he drove a Corolla that was twenty years old). It meant he got to watch Keith cross the parking lot, hands shoved in the pockets of his leather jackets, incongruous with the rest of the parents, who were mostly young moms with bob haircuts.

He also watched Keith's face break into a smile when he noticed a little curly-headed boy scampering across the grass to jump at him with no

hesitation, certain that Keith was going to catch him.

Hunk elbowed him in the ribs, probably because he had that gooey smile Hunk always teased him about on his face, and he really *shouldn't* have been directing that at a parent of one of his students.

Lance frowned at him. He wasn't making that face because he was attracted to Keith—he *was*, but that was beside the point—he was making it because he was all at once charmed and jealous. Ever since his first job in high school as a summer camp counselor he'd seen parents with their kids and thought he wanted that, someday. It was just that lately, it was less "someday" and more "yesterday, if possible." In college, Hunk told him he was more baby-crazy than half the nursing majors, and all he'd ever been able to do was roll his eyes and deny nothing.

Maybe he should look into adoption. Was Oliver adopted? No, there was no way, he looked too much like Keith. Lance briefly wondered who his mom was, until Hunk leaned over and said, "Lance, buddy. You're still staring."

Shit. He shook his head. "Jeez. Thanks, man," he said, and Hunk just clapped him on the shoulder, like *no problem*, and Lance was, for the hundred thousandth time, thankful that he worked with his best friend.

September

Planning a field trip was stressful. It was Lance's least favorite part of his job, because he'd never been good at organizing things, or planning in general. When he had to coordinate with museum directors, school administration, all three kindergarten teachers, *and* the PTA, he got kind of overwhelmed.

The field trip was in a week and a half, and he was close to having his entire to-do list checked off (or, rather, violently scratched out because he was so damn glad to be done with stuff), but there was one thing left: parent chaperones. They were required to have a certain number of people supervising per number of students, and four teachers was *not* enough for all the kindergarten classes.

That was why he was meeting Robin from the PTA, even though she kind of scared him. She had three kids, in fifth, third, and kindergarten, respectively, and Lance was sure she was going to be the PTA president until the last one graduated to middle school. It was kind of impressive how she managed to get unanimously elected every year, though.

The real reason Robin scared him, was because she was finalizing her divorce, and she always looked at Lance like, uh, like that. Like even if they were talking about the most boring thing in the world—and school policies on chaperones was pretty close—everything he said was extremely interesting. Also, she always put her hand on his arm when they talked, which was distracting, not because he was into her, but because she always had an elaborate manicure, and he thought that was kind of cool. She thought the only way to make eye contact with him was through her lashes, and it made her look like if she could, she'd eat him alive.

They sat at one of the picnic tables in the art room, because Lance's desk only had one chair and it would've been weird for one of them to stand. They were both on the same side, Lance's to-do list and his folder full of notes between them, along with Robin's phone, which was roughly the size of her entire face. She would occasionally mark something down in a note she had pulled open, and her lacquered nails tapped on the screen when she did.

"So, we're still looking for two more people," he said, absently tapping his pen against his lower lip, which she seemed to like, so he started tapping it against the table instead, which, he'd been told, was obnoxious.

"You know if I had the day off, I'd be there," she said, seriously. Lance wasn't really sure what she did, but he thought maybe she worked at a salon. Or was that Karen? He could never remember.

"Yeah, thank you," he said. "We're sending the kids home with another request, and that usually gets people, because nobody's gonna be the person who makes it so a bunch of kindergarteners can't go on a field trip, y'know?"

"Yeah, exactly, that's smart," she said, even though it was just simple logic. "I'll send an e-mail out to the rest of the PTA, too."

"Oh, awesome, thanks!" There was one thing Lance really appreciated Robin for: she was good at, uh... coercing? Extorting? Convincing. Convincing other parents to do things. She was a cool lady, actually, and Lance liked her as a person, but she seemed to like him as a body, and that made it a little hard to be friends with her.

"You know, if we have a lot more to go over, we could do it over dinner sometime this week," she said, and Lance flicked absently through the notepad he had his to-do list on, then fumbled with the hole he'd torn in the paper when he got a little too excited about scratching something out. He didn't really have anything else to go over, but maybe it'd be polite to ask if she wanted to come hang out with him and Hunk and Shay on Friday.

No, wait. Hunk didn't like Robin. And, while Lance appreciated Hunk at the height of his passive-aggression, he thought maybe he shouldn't knowingly inflict that on somebody.

"I don't really have anything else," he admitted.

"Well, then we could just do dinner, if you want." She'd sensed his hesitation and she was going for it. If anything, Lance could learn how to be better at flirting from her. Maybe the arm-touch thing worked if you didn't have rhinestones on your fingernails and if the person you were hitting on didn't have ADHD. Maybe he should try that on Keith. No, that was ridiculous.

Lance couldn't lie to himself, though. He knew that if he went to dinner with her, he was agreeing to a date, not just a cool new friend who could probably eviscerate a man with her fingernails. He really had to stop getting distracted by those things, but they were filed to spiked points this week, and that was fucking *awesome*. Lance wished he could do something like that, but he'd get a lot of weird looks, it would make his job significantly more difficult, and he would one hundred percent scratch his eyeball out.

Anyway, Lance didn't want to go on a date with her, partially because she *was* still technically married, and partially because he thought she only wanted to date him so she could show off to the rest of the PTA.

"Actually, uh... I'm gonna have to say no, I'm..." Getting over a rough break-up? That had been his usual go-to for a while. But that was three years ago, and also a lie. Not really looking for a relationship right now? Also a lie. Not straight? True, but he was also definitely attracted to women, so kind of a lie. Not interested in you? That was mean.

He had to say something eventually, and, to his surprise more than anyone's, it was, "I'm interested in somebody else." *Also* a lie, shit, he could practically hear Abuela yelling at him from beyond the grave.

Except, for a long moment, all he could think about was Keith. Two things about Keith in particular, really. One: the smile on his face when he talked to his son, and two: the way Lance had never seen him in anything other than a V-neck that showed off his collarbones *perfectly*.

It wasn't a lie, and he wasn't sure if that was better or worse.

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Lance, Hunk, and Shay usually hung out on weekends, because if they tried to do something on a weeknight, either Lance or Hunk would fall asleep at ten. God, that was ridiculous. They stayed up past midnight pretty much every day when they were in college. Was they getting old? He was pretty sure that was it.

Sometimes, they switched up whose house they hung out at, but it was usually Hunk and Shay's place, because they had an actual house, and Lance still lived in a shitty apartment building that had been constructed in the 70s and looked like it.

This week, though, they decided to hang at Lance's, because he wanted to cook, and Hunk's kitchen scared him a little bit. It was all so well-organized and fancy, he didn't know what to do with it. He'd never had a kitchen that

wasn't a wild mess most of the time, and, in Lance's mind, that was how kitchens were supposed to be.

He was making chili, because his favorite thing to cook was anything where you could stick a whole bunch of stuff in a huge pot, leave it simmering unsupervised for half a day, and end up with something delicious. Except, Friday afternoon, he found his fridge wanting, and he decided to go pick some stuff up so he could get things together Saturday morning whenever he wanted to, instead of having to drag himself to the grocery store at 8 in the morning.

Lance did not do well in the grocery store. If he had a list, things went a little bit better, but even then, he'd end up buying a bunch of food he didn't need, just because he forgot that he already had plenty of that at home, and *seriously, Lance, why did you think you needed a new thing of mustard? When have you used that in your life, ever?*

He made it through the produce section okay, even though his internal voice was telling him he maybe got too many peppers for one thing of chili—his internal voice was *wrong*, because such a thing didn't exist. Then, he remembered he was running out of bread, and he detoured from what was supposed to be a quick trip, which already felt like the beginning of ending up there for a few hours.

He texted Hunk while he walked down the aisle, forearms propped up on the bar of his cart, not entirely paying attention to shopping, which would only make this take longer, but Hunk *had* to know that there was someone professionally making grocery-store signs who couldn't spell names of tropical fruits correctly.

That was about when he started to feel like somebody was watching him. He glanced up, and saw a middle-aged lady who was definitely not watching him, and then a familiar man in a familiar leather jacket, who was.

There were alarm bells ringing in his head like sirens, because *alert, hello, your giant crush is here and making eye contact with you*, and he elected to ignore them and go talk to him, because something, something, universe

and third chances. Plus, he'd done pretty well talking to Keith on that field trip, even if he did compare him to a comic book character.

"Hey, Keith!" he said, hoping he didn't sound too breathless and over-eager. He probably did.

Keith looked mildly distressed, and Lance got it, he'd make that face, too, if somebody caught him staring at them. "Hey," he said, and didn't meet his eyes, which was a shame, because Lance had been told he had very pretty eyes.

"What's up, man?" Lance asked, very casual, go Lance, and Keith dropped his gaze to somewhere around the vicinity of his hand shoved in his pocket.

"Not much," Keith said, and Lance thought he was gonna end the conversation then and there, but he started talking about his family dinner and something about his brother? Lance spent most of it distracted, because Keith's hair was down and curling around his cheeks and his shoulders. He'd learned to still be a functional conversationalist even when he was distracted, though, because he spent fifty percent of his time distracted by something.

Lance didn't clue back into the conversation until he found himself saying something ridiculous about finding out that teachers don't sleep in their classrooms. *Really?* He was going with *that*?

But then the corner of Keith's mouth curled up, and he said, "I know you have a real life, Lance, believe me," and holy shit, he did remember.

"I knew you remembered the bar thing!" Okay, that was a little loud for a grocery store, but Lance wasn't great at volume control when he got excited.

Keith's entire face went red when he argued that there wasn't a thing. Oh, god, there was totally a thing. There had to have been a thing, if Keith was blushing like that. Lance, doing as Lance did, couldn't stop babbling and calm down enough to maybe have a real conversation about said thing, so he continued to joke, leaning into Keith's shoulder playfully until Keith

pushed him away and, starting to look more embarrassed than flustered, said, "of course I acted like I forgot."

Right. Because that was what adults did, adults didn't try to date one of their students' parents, even if he didn't *technically* meet Keith through the school. And Keith, who was clearly better at being an adult, said exactly that, and Lance *knew* he was about to ask if they could just forget about the whole thing and pretend like they never met each other.

He couldn't let Keith finish that thought, so he said, "it's cool. I hit on you, you turned me down, that's all. We're fine." He thought he sounded a little too disinterested.

"Oh. Okay," Keith said, looking at him with something like relief. Of course it would be relief. That was exactly what Lance would be feeling if somebody he wasn't into started acting like the feeling was mutual. Like, if Robin came up and said, *hey, I know I hit on you a lot, but you turned me down and so I've moved on*. Yeah, he'd be relieved.

He got out of there as fast as he could. It was probably his shortest grocery store trip to date.

Almost exactly twenty-four hours later, he was curled up into a ball on the armchair in his living room, complaining about his colossal failure to Hunk (well, Hunk and Shay, but, as per usual with Lance's romantic woes, Shay wasn't really listening—he didn't blame her). When he finished the whole damn story, he shoved his face into one of the throw pillows he'd impulse-bought until the static electricity started to crackle in his hair.

"It doesn't sound that bad to me," Hunk said. "Sounds more like you had an adult conversation with the guy."

"That was not the adult conversation I wanted to have," Lance mumbled, and Hunk, who was now practiced at translating Lance when he was talking while hiding his face in something, just sighed.

"Yeah, buddy, it doesn't always work that way, I guess."

"It was just like, an entirely new confirmation that he doesn't like me, and like, okay, thanks, I already had the other confirmations about that, I don't need another one. Jesus," Lance said, tipping his head back now, his hair sufficiently turned into a spiky mess.

Hunk hummed thoughtfully and looked out Lance's window for a second before responding. "You know, if he doesn't like you, maybe you should just, you know? Try to be friends with him."

"Stop having all the mature, grown-up responses to everything, Hunk," Lance grumbled, "you make me feel like we might actually have our lives together."

"Maybe we do," he said. "Well. Maybe we're getting there."

"When did that happen?" Shay asked, sounding a little amused by it. Lance was, too; he could have sworn the three of them were sitting around in Lance and Hunk's shitty dorm room planning the universe's most stupid road-trip like a week ago. And now the two of them were married, and Lance was actually considering acting like an adult about something.

Time flies, right? People still said that. He was pretty sure.

October

Every year, sometime during the fall, Hunk and Shay invited all their friends and coworkers who they were kind of friends with over for dinner. They'd been doing it since they got their first apartment in college and finally had a real kitchen, and Lance went every year, because that's what best friends do. They held it near the end of October, usually, because they wanted to make sure they weren't conflicting with anybody's holiday plans, but it originally had to be after the semester started, and the October thing stuck.

Every year, Lance came over early, either because he was living with Hunk already (college) or because he was making sure Hunk didn't have a complete freak-out over making sure the menu was perfect (always).

And, every year, he ended up drinking just like, a *lot* of wine. It worked out alright, because then Lance was ultra-chill, and he could force Hunk to calm down, because his chill was contagious. Also, because Shay worried too much about Hunk when he was stressed out, and Lance had come to believe that Hunk had to be a certain level of stressed out to get anything done, just like Lance had to procrastinate.

Maybe he should start looking into why Shay worried about the two of them. She seemed like she might have a point, here.

Maybe instead, he should drink the rest of his glass of wine.

"How's it going, buddy?" he asked, seated in one of the tall stools at the breakfast bar separating the kitchen from the dining room. By this point in the day, Lance didn't dare cross the imaginary line into the kitchen, so this was as close as he got.

Hunk gave him a noncommittal hum in reply.

"That good?"

"Yeah, kind of," he said. "I've done this so many times by now, I think I've got it down to a science."

"That's true, your timing has gotten better," Lance said. He dropped his head onto his crossed arms and watched Shay, who was decorating, which basically meant covering the house in orange and red shit, because fall. She had also told Lance he couldn't help, which Lance was still a little offended by, because he'd be a great house-decorator. He was an artist.

Granted, the last time he'd decorated a large space of a building had been when he curated all the student art for last spring's Art Show, but still. He'd be good at it.

"You know, Shay had somebody she wanted to introduce you to," Hunk said, consulting his list of what all he was cooking and when everything had to go into the oven to have it all ready at exactly six-thirty. "Right, babe?"

"Oh, yes!" she cheered, barely visible behind a huge bouquet of fake flowers and fake tree branches with fall leaves on them. "Micah, he works with me. He's very nice!"

Ever since Hunk and Shay got married, they decided Lance needed to find true love, also. He was glad to have two other people joining his lifelong personal quest, but the blind dates they set him up on didn't always work out. Actually, none of them had, yet.

Lance eyed both of them suspiciously while Shay found a vase for her floral arrangement. It was a really pretty floral arrangement, and he was distracted by the color composition of it for a second, before he said, "this better not be a huge mess. Last time you 'introduced me' to somebody was Nyma, and that did *not* go well."

"Oh, yeah, didn't she like... tie you up, or something?" Hunk asked.

"Handcuffed me," Lance said. "And like, I could be kind of into that, but I'm definitely not into people just doing that out of nowhere and then *trying to steal my car*." For once, Lance had been happy that a blind date of his had seen his car and though, wow, that looks about fifteen miles from a breakdown. Ol' Blue had her advantages.

"Oh, I forgot about that part. I just remember having to come over and uncuff you," he said, cracking open the oven door to check something, and then immediately shutting it. "Honestly, I never liked her in the first place."

"Coulda told me."

"I *did*."

"I don't remember that, but I'm gonna say yeah, you probably did," Lance said, punctuating it with another drink of wine. He checked his phone for the time, answered a text from his sister in a way that he hoped didn't very clearly read as *I'm drunk*, and then said, "It's almost six," to Hunk, as a warning that somebody might be ringing their doorbell soon. He hooked a few fingers in the collar of his blazer, which was draped over the back of

his chair, and put it on, because his second most important responsibility at these things was to look good.

Not two minutes later, Shay opened the door to invite in a couple of her friends and her older brother. Lance didn't know her friends that well, and to be honest, the only thing he knew about her brother was that he used to hate Hunk, which was ridiculous, because who could hate Hunk? Lance thought he was kind of suspicious.

While Shay greeted people, Lance chilled for a bit and kept people from getting too close to the kitchen while Hunk was finishing things up. He had everything done before it got too crowded—Lance swore there were more people here every year.

By the time the party was in full swing and Lance had another, different glass of wine in his hands (god, he was starting to feel like his aunt), a tall man who was also holding a glass of wine approached him, gave him a curious look, and said, "would you happen to be Lance?"

"Uh. Yes," he said, frowning at this intrusion into his conversation with a couple of his and Hunk's college buddies.

"Sorry," the guy said, around a breathy laugh. "I probably shouldn't have just... walked up and said that. Shay was trying to introduce you to me, but then her, uh, I think her brother...?"

"Oh, you're that Micah guy, right?" Lance asked, because yeah, he kind of was the type of person Shay would try to set him up with. Well-dressed, passably handsome, cute eyes, kind of awkward, but not as awkward as Lance. Complete hipster, though, handlebar mustache and all. Lance wasn't sure what he thought about that yet.

"Yeah," he got in response, along with a handshake, and wow, his hands were cold.

Lance turned to introduce him to the rest of the guys, but the rest of the guys had ducked into the garage to grab something out of the designated

Beer Fridge, which was usually a Coke Zero fridge. Actually, Lance couldn't remember what weird soda Hunk usually had in there.

"Uh, so," Lance started, because it was pretty difficult to come back from "we're being set up by our friends and both of us totally know this, and now there's no way for an organic introduction to happen." Couldn't be worse than his last attempt to introduce himself to a potential romantic interest while he was leaning toward drunk. He just had to hold off on the pickup lines, this time. "How do you know Shay?" he asked. Shit. He already knew that. They worked together.

"We work together," Micah said.

"Oh, that's cool." Lance did a terrible job at pretending like he didn't already know that.

"How about you?"

"Hunk's been my best friend since freshman year of college," he said. "I maintain that I actually set the two of them up, but neither of them remember that."

Micah laughed, but it sounded perfunctory. Lance wondered how he was drinking that wine without getting any in his mustache. You'd be able to see it if it got in there, right? He was holding a red, you'd totally be able to see it in his dirty-blond hair. Lance suddenly thought he might be more interested in dark-haired guys.

Yeah, dark-haired guys who wear leather jackets and are named Keith, his brain supplied, and he realized he'd missed something Micah was saying.

"Sorry, what?" he asked, trying to sound like he wasn't thinking about other hot men (another hot man) while he was talking to a guy he might be interested in (a guy he was probably not interested in).

"I was just saying, I've only met Hunk a couple of times. Seems like a nice guy, though," he said, and oh, thank god, something Lance could talk about for ages.

"He's the best. Seriously. One time, I got handcuffed—actually, never mind. That story doesn't need to be repeated."

Micah was starting to give him a weird look, and Lance turned around, so he could find Hunk and a way to get out of this situation, but instead, he ended up staring at... Keith?

Wait. No. He had to be seeing things. He shook his head, but it still looked like Keith, turning away from him and heading back toward the living room. Why would Keith be here? Did Hunk invite him, as some weird... favor, for Lance? Prank on Lance? Both?

"One second," he said to Micah, fully aware that it would end up being way, way more than one second and that he was an asshole. He darted after Keith, yelling a too-loud greeting over the hum of the party.

Keith, it turned out, was there by complete coincidence, which meant he was on chance number... four? The universe either really liked Lance McClain or thought he was pretty amusing when he was ruining all his chances. Anyway, Keith was there. His sister worked with Shay or something, Lance was having trouble following conversation because he was tipsy and also Keith was cute.

He was, as usual, dressed mostly in black, but he had a blazer on that was really dark burgundy and, Lance had to say, kind of matched the blue one he was wearing. Underneath, he had a black shirt buttoned all the way up to his throat, tucked into a pair of impressively tight jeans.

Lance somehow managed not to stare at Keith's thighs too much, and continue the conversation like a normal person. He didn't completely blow it this time, not a single pick-up line. He gave Keith a compliment that wasn't on his appearance, asked about his kid, and he laughed at Keith's jokes—the guy had a good sense of humor. Maybe Lance *was* getting more mature.

He wasn't sure he was completely successful in disengaging from the conversation like a normal person. He definitely looked like he was going

to run off and tell Hunk everything. That was because he was going to run off and tell Hunk everything.

"Keith's here," he said, managing to catch Hunk as he was getting things set up in the dining room. "Why is Keith here?"

"I think he knows somebody who works with Shay," Hunk said. "I saw him earlier, too."

"*Why didn't you warn me?*" Lance hissed, in lieu of shouting and hysterics.

"Because I know you'd start acting like an idiot if you knew he was here," Hunk said. "Did you act like an idiot anyway?"

"I don't... think so," Lance said, re-evaluating their conversation. "No, wait, I think I did."

"Just try to survive through dinner," Hunk sighed, and Lance promised him that he wouldn't drop dead of heart palpitations before dessert.

Miraculously, Lance survived, mostly because he didn't sit anywhere near Keith. Hunk's house was small enough that people were scattered all over the living room, dining room, and kitchen, and Lance didn't know where Keith was, but he spent his time on the living room couch, balancing his plate on an end table and catching up with Allura, because he only saw her twice a year: at this, and whenever she decided to visit in the summer. She was off in San Diego, both building a business empire and being an incredibly beautiful model, and she still perfectly fit the title Lance had given her during a college party and after tequila happened, "a goddess among the rest of us mortals."

He didn't see Micah again, which, he suspected, was probably because he'd been kind of an asshole. He wasn't sure how to apologize for that, either, so he was sort of glad he didn't see him, because he was pretty sure, "sorry, I had to go because the boy I like is here," didn't work past the sixth grade.

"You look weird," Allura said, and Lance knew she wasn't commenting on his actual appearance, because he looked *fantastic*.

Unfortunately, "sorry, the boy I like is here," also didn't work very well here. Actually, this one was more likely to get him dragged off by his ear , because Allura didn't stand for that kind of foolishness (her words).

"Yeah, just... it's been a long week, you know?" he said. Anything more vague would have been a series of hand gestures and sounds that were vague approximations of human speech.

She narrowed her eyes, and Lance knew she didn't believe him. He also knew she'd find out why she didn't believe him. He prepared himself for the inevitable. Whenever that happened.

After dinner was over, people started filtering back into the living room, including Keith and his... sister? Brother? Small, sweater-vest-wearing sibling? Yep, let's go with that one. They were arguing about something—rather, Keith was arguing, and his sibling was just laughing at him, then smacking him good-naturedly on the shoulder and almost making him spill his drink.

That reminded Lance. Where was his drink? He had lost track of it somewhere around the fourth glass of wine, or maybe the fifth.

Keith's sibling reached up to ruffle his hair and then walked into the kitchen, so instead of trying to find his drink, or grabbing another one, Lance approached Keith. Sort of. 'Approached' made it sound like he did something normal, when actually, he bounced over and threw his arm around Keith's shoulder. Keith didn't freak out, didn't go, *hey, guy that I only sort of know, take a few steps back, and cut out the touching*. He put his hand on Lance's back instead, which should not have had his insides exploding with butterflies. Was he *twelve*? Well, Hunk did say Lance reverted into a middle schooler when he was drunk, so he decided he might as well go with it. He laughed too loud at Keith's jokes, which, he thought, had something to do with the whole regression thing.

"Hey, this is taking it back, huh?" he asked, leaning a little heavier into Keith. "You know, 'cause when we met, we were. Y'know. Drunk." This was his clever way of making sure Keith knew he was drunk, and hopefully, Keith would assume he didn't act this way when he was sober. Although,

Keith had had enough interactions with sober Lance that he would probably see through that.

"I'm not drunk yet," Keith said. He still had his hand on Lance's back, and it was starting to slide downward.

"Then you should finish that glass of wine," Lance said, and yes, awesome, his voice ended up all deep and sexy and not weird.

Keith's hand dropped from Lance's back, but he did bring his wineglass to his lips. Lance removed his arm from Keith's shoulders, and Keith remained at his side, not putting any distance between them, still close enough that his shoulder was pressed against Lance's. He was a little bit shorter than Lance, short enough that Lance was looking down, casually watching him, and Keith hadn't noticed. His eyelashes were so thick, casting shadows on elegantly sloped cheekbones, and the way he tilted his head gave Lance an unfairly gorgeous view of his lips. The bottom one was stained purple from the wine.

Lance was suddenly cursed with a mental image of Keith tilting his chin up to kiss him, instead of to drink, and, horror of all horrors, the soft noise Keith made after he swallowed matched itself perfectly to the two of them parting in his daydream. Keith's lips were chapped, but he bet they'd still feel good and, wow, he really had to stop thinking about this. He was having trouble finding it in himself to feel bad about it, though.

"Hey, Lance," Keith said, still looking absently at his now-empty glass, "Can we talk? We should talk."

Lance had to pause for a second and make sure he wasn't still daydreaming. Keith's eyes met his, waiting for his answer. "Yeah? What's up?" he asked, because Keith probably did want to talk, which meant he wanted to say actual words to him, not just do whatever Lance was picturing in the back of his mind.

"No, like. I want to *talk*. Just to you."

Okay, or he *did* want to do whatever Lance was picturing in the back of his mind. Oh, god. This was actually happening, that was the most obvious "let's go somewhere secluded so that any talking we can do can end with kissing" he'd ever heard.

Bedrooms were out. Garage was... freezing. Bathroom? No, gross. They weren't nineteen and at the club.

Hunk's office door was closed. "C'mon, then," Lance said, and because he didn't feel like he could exactly grab Keith's hand yet, he just put a hand on his shoulder and steered him in the right direction, through the kitchen and past the bathroom and the closed garage door, into the office, and his heart couldn't possibly have been pounding any faster.

This was it. He was finally going to—he should wait for Keith to do something first. He couldn't wait for Keith to do something first. Keith was leaning against the wall, visibly relaxing, his lips parted in an almost-smile. Lance had to kiss him.

Well. He didn't *have* to. Lance was going to kiss him.

He put a hand on the back of Keith's neck and pulled him in, meeting him halfway through a word, the fabric of his blazer creasing under Lance's palms. His mouth was warm, his lips had parted just enough to make it a pretty damn good first kiss. Whatever he'd been saying dissolved into a soft groan that had Lance's entire body heating up. Keith grabbed his arms, fingers digging in, and his mouth moved under Lance's as he started to kiss back. This was it. This was exactly what he'd wanted, ever since summer, this was what Lance had told himself over and over to never expect to have.

When he leaned back, Keith's cheeks were pink, and he breathed a soft, "oh," like he hadn't expected Lance to kiss him, and wasn't sure what to do about it yet.

Lance's heart dropped into his stomach—no, past that, straight out of him, and he said, "sorry, was that, uh... was that not what I was supposed to be doing?" terrified that the answer was going to be yes, and, following that, get off me.

"No," Keith said instead, and Lance must have relocated his heart, because it was racing again. "No. That's exactly what I wanted." Then, he pulled Lance in again and he just about lost his damn mind, because kissing Keith was so much better when he was wholeheartedly into it, his lips wet, his teeth scraping just enough. Later, Lance would admit to himself that he was trying to give Keith the best kiss of his life, because part of him was quietly whispering that this was the only one he'd get. Right now, though, he was just losing whatever remained of his sanity, because Keith was sucking on his bottom lip, biting gently before letting him go for just a second, then fitting their mouths together again.

A guy could get addicted to this. Lance already was. He sank his fingers into Keith's hair, and he was probably messing it up, but Keith made messy hair work, so he didn't worry about it too much. Keith had his hands on his chest. He must have felt Lance's heart trying to break out of his ribcage.

Keith pulled away, and he had his chin tipped up, and some of his hair was clinging to his neck. Lance brushed it away with this thumb and leaned in to kiss him there, just below his ear, where the scent of his cologne was almost as intoxicating as all the wine. Keith was saying something, and because Lance was only half-listening, it took him a while to realize it was something about someone catching them at it.

Lance decided, let them, and then he moaned against Keith's neck and made him say, "god, that feels good," instead.

"Yeah?" he asked, as quietly as he could manage, because most of him wanted to scream right about now. He ducked his head to press his lips against Keith's neck again. God, he wanted to tell Keith everything, tell him that he was all Lance could think about, how many people Lance had turned down because they didn't compare to him. He took a deep breath, and admitted, "you have no idea how long I've wanted to do that," on the exhale.

This time, it was Keith's turn to ask, "yeah?"

"Since last summer," Lance said, and he opened his mouth to tell Keith the rest of it, but was cut off when Hunk knocked on the door and scared

tension into every muscle of his body. He made his excuses to Hunk, even though there was little that would keep him from telling Hunk *exactly* what he'd been doing, later on.

He didn't focus in until Keith said, "we should go," and Lance noticed all of it: the pink still suffusing his cheeks, his lips red and, if Lance wasn't mistaken, poutier than usual. His fingers drifting up to touch his neck, where Lance's mouth had been. His tongue poking out to wet his bottom lip, where Lance's mouth had also been.

Lance had to kiss him one more time.

November

Keith wasn't around much, after that. Lance would have chalked it up to busy everyday life, if he hadn't tried to say hello to Keith one afternoon when he was on pick-up duty, and Keith ignored him, looking harangued. Lance hoped for the best—maybe there was just something else going on and Keith didn't intensely regret kissing him—but then Halloween happened.

Halloween was, by his closest estimation, a disaster. Two days later, he still couldn't stop thinking about Keith looking pointedly away from him and saying, *I can't do this right now*. The whole scene replayed for him over and over.

I don't think that's a good idea.

It's just not a good time for me to be with somebody.

Lance had to respect him for it. He also had to admit it wasn't what he'd wanted, so Friday night found him deep in a mope. He'd stopped paying attention to whatever the hell it was he was watching on Netflix because he was busy wishing things had gone right. He started wishing he had ice cream, and he cursed Ben, Jerry, and whoever else decided that ice cream was the default mope food. He knew he couldn't do this forever, that he'd have to face Keith plenty of times in the future and act like a normal person, but he also knew that he *could* do this for the rest of the night. Or until

Hunk figured out how hard he was moping and came over to get him to cut it out.

He should probably text Hunk.

Lance turned off the TV, then turned it back on, because he missed the background noise. He located his phone (sliding between the couch cushions), and was surprised that he had a notification that wasn't from Hunk, especially since Lance's last message to him had been, *sorry, can't go for drinks tonight*, and for Lance, that was suspicious as all hell.

Seriously, who the hell was texting him? Who even used Facebook messenger anymore? The name took him a minute, always did, because her last name had been Martin when he knew her.

Rebecca Sherman

Hey, Lance! How are you?

It was followed by a string of smiley faces, preceded by her previous message, reading, "Hi! It's been way too long, how have you been?" Lance hadn't responded.

Her timing couldn't have been worse. If pressed, Lance could probably think of somebody he wanted to talk to less, but his ex-girlfriend was close enough to the top of the list that he didn't try. He was torn between hiding his phone from himself and answering with something rude.

Instead, he was distracted by a text popping up and covering her Facebook icon, so he didn't have to see a picture of Becca smiling with her husband. Oh, hey, Allura! Thanks, Allura.

Then, Lance actually read the message, and, on second thought, maybe he shouldn't have been thanking Allura.

Allura

I figured out why you were weird at that party.

Lance was about to go for the option of "hide his phone from himself," because he didn't want to hear whatever her theory was, but then she called him, because she knew he'd ignore it.

"Hey," he said, like he hadn't even seen her text, "what's up?"

"I know why you were acting so strangely," she said.

"Yep, you figured it out, I suddenly developed a healthy amount of concern over the fact that my car is a piece of shit and might kill me," Lance said, switching off his TV for real this time, then standing and taking his late-night cereal to the sink. Late-night cereal was never a good idea, even if Lance was old, and late-night was ten o'clock now.

"No, it's not that. Although, if you actually have, I'm glad for you," Allura said. "You have feelings for somebody. It took me a while, because ordinarily, you'd go and do something before anybody caught you making that face."

"Hunk always catches me making that face anyway," Lance said, denying nothing. Also, confirming nothing.

Well, maybe confirming something. "Who is it," Allura asked. Lance suddenly wasn't sure if he was being asked about his love life or interrogated about a murder.

"You don't know him," he said, tucking his phone between his ear while he rinsed out the last of his soggy, gross cereal.

"Well, I assumed I didn't know him."

"Right, so why does it matter? I like a guy, he doesn't like me, whatever. I'm trying to get over this, if you haven't figured that out, so I'm pretty sure this conversation isn't helping," he said, nearly dropping his phone trying to open the dishwasher.

He heard her scoff from the other end of the line. "That's ridiculous."

"Listen, Allura, I know you've never been rejected, but not everyone can be the most beautiful individual to ever land on the surface of this planet."

"I wasn't talking about that," she said, "It's ridiculous that this conversation isn't helping. Isn't that how you, ah, deal with things? Talking it out, and whatever?"

She wasn't wrong. "You're not wrong."

"Of course I'm not. Tell me, what's happened? Is it someone Hunk set you up with?"

"Nope," he said, flopping onto the couch. "Hunk just kind of... encouraged me, I guess? I met the guy, Keith, I met him in a bar."

"I don't see why being rejected by some *guy you met in a bar* is a big deal," she said, exuding disdain even over the phone.

"Well, then he turned out to be one of my students' dads."

She laughed, high and clear, then muffled, like she had realized she was laughing and was covering her mouth. "Are you entirely certain you're not in a made for TV movie? Possibly on Lifetime?" she asked once she stopped. He snorted, a perfect foil to her constant air of dignity.

"No, dude. Can't be in a Lifetime movie, I'm not a straight white dude."

She made a noise of agreement. "So, what's the issue? You can't handle seeing somebody you're interested in? You're friends with me. I mean, that's not applicable anymore, but. Whatever. Why is this a problem?"

"He's very, very cute, Allura," he said. When she didn't laugh, he kept going. "It's just that... I keep feeling like I have a chance with him. It's like, he'll brush me off, but then, then. I don't know. Also, he kissed me."

"Is that why you disappeared during Hunk's party?" she asked, and he could only agree, and wonder how the hell she'd come to that conclusion so quickly. This was how she always found out whenever they tried to throw her a surprise birthday party. "So, what are you going to do?"

"Nothing, probably," Lance said. "He told me he didn't want a boyfriend, so I just gotta get over it. Go home for Thanksgiving, see my family, get asked why I'm still so single, forget about him. Et cetera." Both of them sighed, Lance self-pitying and Allura exasperated.

"Well," Allura said, "let me know how that goes."

She didn't say it like she thought it was going to go great.

December

Lance more or less did exactly what he told Allura he was going to. He flew back home for vacation, because even though his family wasn't big into the Thanksgiving thing, it was one of the only times everybody was guaranteed to have a day off.

It was warm back home, a break from chilly autumn, and he spent most of his Thanksgiving vacation toting around at least one preschooler. His middle sister and her husband had just had a baby in September, and Lance hadn't met the newest addition to the family yet, so he was pretty excited that there was another person in his family who was still small enough that they didn't care if you squished their cheeks. The three-year-old twins would rather try to both get piggyback rides from him at the same time, which consistently resulted in them falling off.

Good thing toddlers tended to kind of... bounce.

Of course, he got the inevitable, "Lance, why haven't you found someone nice to settle down with, I want enough grandchildren for a small army," thing from his abuela, which he'd been getting since he turned eighteen, so by now, it was more of a careworn fake-scolding than anything.

This year, though, when he said, "come on, you know I'm still too young for that," he wasn't sure it was entirely the right argument. Should've been, "come on, you know I'm shit at dating," but that was probably not appropriate to say in front of your grandmother and a couple of toddlers who didn't need to be picking up swear words from their uncle.

He came back home to a snowstorm.

Lance hated snow. He'd been excited about it for approximately three days in his first year of college when he saw it for the first time, but then he learned how hard it was to drive in, and decided, fuck snow.

The total white-out started as he was driving home from the airport, and so he spent the latter half of the trip going twenty miles per hour on the highway. It stopped later that night, so Lance suspected that it existed just to hassle him (because that's definitely how snow worked, and he was definitely the only person inconvenienced by the storm). And, unfortunately, the roads were clear enough the next morning that nobody got a snow day, which, in Lance's opinion, was the only thing snow was good for anyway.

Avoiding Keith was kind of easy, this time of year. On a regular class day, the only time Lance would see him was when he was picking up Oliver, but from the space between Thanksgiving break and mid-December, Lance was excused from student pick-up duty, because he had more important things to do.

Namely, getting the sets ready for the Holiday Musical. This year, the theme had something to do with stars and clouds, just a whole lot of night-sky-related musical numbers.

Lance didn't actually know much about the script. He only cared about one thing: glitter. More glitter than they ever let him get away with. He had an entire glitter shelf in the art room, and it rarely saw the light of day, because parents, for some reason, didn't like their kids tracking it all through the house. And he was going to put all of it on the set for this thing. It would be a good thing that they didn't have spotlights, because someone would go blind. Because of glitter.

"God, there's going to be sparkles on the stage curtains for years," Hunk said, as he helped Lance hang an enormous sign over the stage. It read "Happy Holidays" in an impressive script, considering it was cut out of a giant piece of wood. Lance was used to working with safety scissors, but when he wanted to, he was pretty alright with power tools.

"I know," Lance replied, much cheerier about it than Hunk was. The sign was already raining sparkles whenever they moved it. One might say he'd overdone it, but Lance thought this was the only way to do musical theater. "Hey, is this straight?" he called over his shoulder to Shay, who, bless her, had dropped by to spot them. Thank god they knew someone who was willing to spend her afternoon making sure nobody got past that part on the ladder where it said, don't stand on this step. "Nobody," meaning Lance.

He could have sworn Shay muttered *straight as you are*, before saying, "no, Lance, your end needs to go down further."

Lance adjusted the metal cord they were using to hang this thing. The nice thing about the gym and the auditorium being the same building, was that there were giant metal beams making up the ceiling, since the usual plaster tiles would get pulverized by dodgeballs in a week. Made it easier to hang things, too. Especially when you had a giant, sparkly sign that weighed like fifty pounds.

"Now?" Hunk asked.

"Yeah, it's good," she said, and then she had to catch Lance, because he tried climbing down a ladder too fast and missed the second-to-last step.

"You went all-out on this thing," Hunk said, once they got the ladders back in their storage closet. "Seriously, I think this is the best you've ever done."

"Well, I'm definitely not trying to distract myself from anything," Lance said, and it was a nice little package of sarcasm and self-deprecation.

He didn't see Hunk roll his eyes, but he was sure he'd done it when Lance wasn't looking. "You know he's going to be at this thing," Hunk said. "You're going to have to like, be in the same room as him."

"Yeah, I know, I'm cool," Lance said, flicking off the gym lights. "I'm over it, man."

The giant, sparkly sign that he'd spent way too much time on said otherwise.

— — —

Lance didn't see Keith until after the musical was over. He noticed him briefly, watching Oliver play with a couple of his friends, but he didn't get to say anything, because one of the parents started talking to him about the show's theme. She was offended on a personal level that there wasn't more Christmas-related content. Lance didn't know how to tell her that the show was approximately eighty percent Christmas without offending her, so he just nodded along, wishing Hunk would notice and save him from this peril. Lance took a step back, and hit the edge of the stage. He had a brief fantasy of hauling himself up onto it and running to hide backstage, but then he heard, "Lance, hey, can I steal you for a second?" and oh, hey, an actual angel had rescued him from awkward conversation.

Wait. Not an angel. Just Keith. Same difference.

"Yeah, no problem," Lance said, and Keith steered the two of them to the other side of the stage, putting a set of risers between them and Mrs. Robertson. He thanked Keith profusely for saving him. Keith's hand was still on his shoulder while he did.

"I actually did want to talk to you," and he looked away for a second, like if he didn't face Lance, he'd miss the deep breath Keith took. This was either going to be very good, or very bad, and Lance shoved his hands in his pockets, trying to look like he wasn't panicking.

"What's up?" he said, and it came out strangled.

Keith looked back at him, pinning him with eye contact, and Lance had to take a deep breath of his own. "Okay, you know how I said I wasn't... ready, or whatever?" Lance nodded, and he may have missed whatever Keith said next, because this was past tense. This was implying that he was no longer not ready. This was—this was Keith saying, "I was thinking, maybe..." and then truncating the sentence at just the point that made Lance want to scream.

Maybe what. Maybe we could talk about that some more? Maybe we could have a really great conversation like that one we had in Hunk's office?

Maybe, maybe—"d'you wanna go on a date sometime?" He had to ask it before he accidentally asked if he could kiss him instead.

"Yes," Keith sighed, and Lance was seriously considering asking about the kissing thing, too. He gave Keith his phone number, instead.

Before he even left the building for the night, he got a text.

Unknown Number

This is Keith. Coffee?

Lance may have gotten a little excited, and he may have knocked over the giant wooden sign he'd just taken down, scattering glitter all over the gym floor.

He couldn't find it in himself to care.

January

Lance spent Saturday morning cleaning his apartment. He also spent Saturday afternoon cleaning his apartment. It started as "tidying up," and ended with everything even neater than it was when his landlady did her yearly inspection. He took down the *curtains* and washed them. He couldn't remember ever having done that before.

Keith was coming over for dinner, though, and Lance was still in his new-boyfriend-so-everything-must-be-perfect phase, so hell yes, he was going to dust things even he wasn't tall enough to see the tops of and burn candles all day to make his place smell nice. He didn't even know he owned any candles. Turns out, he had two shoved in the back of the hall closet that he'd unnecessarily organized, just on the off chance Keith might need to get something out of there.

They'd only been on one official date: Lance's favorite coffeeshop, cozy weather, kissing, everything. Since then, they'd been texting pretty much constantly, and Lance had learned that Keith somehow always sounded bitchy while he was texting. It had something to do with the fact that he thought every sentence had to end with a period, and something to do with

him not knowing where the emoji keyboard. Lance thought it was a little bit cute.

He'd also learned that Keith, like his five-year-old, loved mac and cheese and was otherwise kind of picky about his food, so Lance had nixed all his fancy dinner ideas and was making mac and cheese (but upscale, with like eight types of cheese and also bacon in it). It made the house smell even better than the candles did.

Because Lance had a ground-floor apartment, he had a door to the outside with a normal doorbell. He didn't have to buzz anyone into the building, so when Keith rang, Lance just nearly tripped over his own feet running to open the door, and tried to look like he hadn't just literally run the length of his apartment.

"Hi! How are you? Is it snowing again? I'm still working on dinner, by the way, it'll be ready in—"

Keith pulled him down to kiss him before he could get to *a few minutes, do you want a glass of wine or something?* His fingertips were cold on the back of Lance's neck because he was wearing those fingerless gloves again, and his nose was cold because it was eleven degrees out. Lance was voting unexpected kisses for "most effective way to get him to stop rambling."

"Hey," Keith said, when he pulled away, leaving Lance grinning and a little dazed. He pushed the door shut because they'd kind of been letting freezing air into the building for the past thirty seconds. While Keith undid his snow-covered work boots and lined them up next to Lance's shoes by the door, he answered each of his questions in turn. "I'm fine, and yeah, it's still snowing. Can I help with any dinner stuff?" He shrugged out of the wool coat he'd traded in his leather jacket for when the temperature dropped, and Lance pointed him to the row of coat-hooks near the front door.

"Nah, stuff's just in the oven," Lance said, "c'mere."

The two of them ended up sprawled on his couch, Keith's fingers still cold through Lance's T-shirt. His mouth was warm, though. So was Lance's fake fireplace-slash-space-heater, which was his favorite thing ever during

winter. Keith fit his mouth to Lance's, leaning back so that Lance was curled over him.

Keith kissed him slow, receptive, like they had all the time in the world, a complete contrast to their first. He didn't push, didn't bother to chase after Lance when he leaned back, because he knew he'd have as many as he wanted.

"So, hey," Keith said, as Lance readjusted himself so that he was sitting next to him, Keith's legs over his lap. "I told Oliver about us."

"Oh. Really?" It seemed both sudden and like it had been a long time coming. Lance rested a hand on Keith's knee and ran his fingers over the place where it was worn a little lighter over his kneecaps.

Keith took his other hand, tracing the lines on his palm absently. "Yeah, I mean, he asked me where I went the other night, and I wasn't gonna make something up. I said I went out with you," he said. Lance was beginning to learn that Keith was very much against parents lying to their children just to avoid having to explain things.

"What did he say?"

Keith laughed and squeezed Lance's hand. "Well, he's watched Cinderella like eight times over break, so he doesn't have a great concept of how dating works. He wants to know when the wedding is."

"Damn. He's worse than all my aunts put together," Lance said.

Keith shrugged. "I mean, he's five. The concept of people dating for multiple years must be weird to him, since a single year is like, twenty percent of his life. Probably like forty percent of his life that he can remember."

Lance laughed and pulled Keith's hand to his mouth so he could press a kiss to his knuckles. "Hey," he mumbled against Keith's fingers, "I can't remember if I set a timer on the oven. We better get up so I don't burn everything."

"You can get up," Keith said, leaning back against the couch. "I'm staying here, thanks. Christmas break is wearing me out."

"You're tired of break?" Lance asked, carefully making his way out from under Keith's legs.

"Yeah, man, it's like ten degrees out. Oliver can't play outside, and he doesn't go to school, so I get like, a hundred percent of the kid energy. Plus, my entire living room is covered in legos right now. That's why we couldn't do this at my house." Keith sat sideways so he was facing Lance in the kitchen, his feet tucked up under himself, arms folded across his chest. He spoke with his eyes shut, his head leaning back against the arm of the couch.

He looked sort of like he belonged there.

"I'd come over anyways," Lance said, opening the oven to peek inside, "I'd risk stepping on a lego for you."

Keith opened one eye. "Slow down, sweetheart, we've only been on a date and a half."

"I think I've been gone on you long enough for that one." Lance shut the oven. Still needed a couple minutes.

Keith stood, and joined him in the kitchen, asking, "how long?" as he did. He leaned against the counter and watched Lance, waiting, while Lance tried to calculate an exact amount of time, and failed.

"I told you before," he said, "since the bar."

Keith leaned into his side and hugged him, his head on Lance's shoulder again. "God. Seriously? I was so shitty to you. How did you keep liking me after all... that."

"You're very pretty."

"No, seriously," Keith said, and his eyebrows weren't kidding, either.

"I guess... I just always kind of knew. It was a feeling. I couldn't stop finding things about you that I liked."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." He leaned down to kiss Keith again, because if he didn't, he'd end up saying, *I don't think I ever will*.

Lance liked to think he wasn't the kind of guy who fell in love after two dates. He absolutely was. And Keith seemed determined to prove it.

Author's Note:

Visit me on tumblr @luddlestons, where I keep drawing more of this AU. I also have a writing tumblr @bambi-simmons which is where all my fic updates live :D